

Mine-resistant, ambush protected vehicle recovers pallet of supplies dropped from C-130 Hercules aircraft in Shay Joy District, Afghanistan (U.S. Navy/Jon Rasmussen)



The USCENTCOM Train

The Deployment and Distribution Operations Center Turns 10

By Mark A. Brown

On December 12, 2003, just months after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and on the cusp of transition to Operation *Iraqi Freedom II*, General John Abizaid, USA, accepted on behalf of U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) an invitation that would birth the first Deployment and Distribution Operations Center (DDOC). In an October 24, 2003, memorandum, General John Handy, USAF, commander of U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM), and General Paul Kern, commander of Army Materiel Command, had offered a “joint intermodal distribution team”

led by a flag officer who “would have visibility and synchronization authority over all theater-level lift platforms.”¹ With General Abizaid’s go-ahead, a team of 42 USTRANSCOM distribution experts began arriving at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait to establish initial operational capability and validate the emerging DDOC concept during the major muscle movements of the *Iraqi Freedom II* transition.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld decided in September 2003 to transfer oversight of the entire Department of Defense (DOD) distribution process to USTRANSCOM.² With the title of DOD Distribution Process Owner added to his list of responsibilities, General Handy decided process changes would be appropriate for oversight of movements, especially

those supporting the operation and the active USCENTCOM area of responsibility. Furthermore, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report released in December 2003 revealed inefficiencies in the logistics support structure; these inefficiencies created a \$1.2 billion discrepancy between the amount of materiel shipped to theater and the amount received by the end user and a “backlog of hundreds of pallets and containers of materiel at various distribution points due to transportation constraints and inadequate asset visibility.”³ So on December 12, 2003, General Abizaid accepted the offer for a USTRANSCOM team of transportation experts to establish themselves at Camp Arifjan to eliminate “gaps and seams between the Strategic and Theater movement end distribution systems.”⁴

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But why a new organization? The theater Joint Movement Center (JMC) had been formally defined in joint doctrine and was performing functions similar to those of the emerging DDOC. The GAO report, USTRANSCOM's new role, and perceptions of theater airlift being inefficiently tasked led Generals Handy and Abizaid to conclude the theater JMC needed to be replaced. The JMC did not have a joint manning document with a specified list of transportation skill sets required; forming a JMC was more of a pick-up game. USTRANSCOM wanted to send its transportation experts into theater to work the issues, and that is exactly what that first-generation DDOC was chartered to do. The USCENTCOM DDOC (CDDOC) became fully mission capable on January 20, 2004, and during the brief transition, USCENTCOM/J4 assigned the theater-level JMC as a subordinate organization under the CDDOC director.⁵ The theater-level JMC merged into CDDOC on March 22, 2004.

The original concept, titled Joint Intermodal Distribution Operations Center, envisioned the new center under the tactical control of a "theater commander, nested into existing Theater Support Command."⁶ However, when actually deployed in early 2004, CDDOC was assigned not to a theater commander or any component but to USCENTCOM headquarters under the J4. That command relationship endures to the present. It was important then and now for CDDOC to make decisions on allocation, mode determination, and validation of movements from an area of operations-wide, combatant command perspective. Although CDDOC physically resides as a next-door neighbor to U.S. Army Central headquarters at Camp Arifjan, it is a tenant organization assigned to Headquarters USCENTCOM/J4. An enduring operating principle at CDDOC has been its charge to act independently from the service or functional components. From the onset, CDDOC has acted based on USCENTCOM priorities and direction.

At the 10-year mark, CDDOC has matured and evolved from the initial sketches of late 2003. CDDOC has

served USCENTCOM and the Defense Transportation System (DTS) from the Operation *Iraqi Freedom* II transition, through the troop surges in both Iraq and Afghanistan, through the withdrawal from Iraq, and now into a full-thrust redeployment and retrograde as Operation *Enduring Freedom* winds down. Manning has varied in step with movement tempo, from the initial cadre of 42 to a high of 85 while both operations were running full throttle. CDDOC has proved its worth over 10 years of refinement and proliferation across all the geographic combatant commands, refining and evolving to match the requirements of the current operational environment, and must do so again in the face of a redeployment and retrograde of unprecedented proportions. The present 2014 structure consists of 45 teammates largely from USTRANSCOM and its components, as well as the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), headed by a one-star flag officer. The scope of their task at hand is daunting.

Current Mission

After 13 years of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, U.S. and allied bases have proliferated, and some have matured into well-established and fully equipped hubs of activity, people, and materiel. Before the Presidentially directed deadline of December 31, 2014, CDDOC will oversee the redeployment of the bulk of the 47,000 troops currently in Afghanistan. The actual number of troops to remain in place is contingent on the Afghan government signing a bilateral support agreement authorizing a relatively small and enduring U.S. military presence. Since January 2012, CDDOC has guided the redeploy movement of 87,000 military, civilian, and contractor personnel from Afghanistan, roughly the population of Des Moines, Iowa, the Ohio State University, or a packed Rose Bowl stadium. There is also the equipment: tactical vehicles of every variety as well as road graders, cranes, and fuel tanker trucks; containers of spare parts; and a miscellany of unit gear. This mountain of equipment must be transferred to the Afghan govern-

ment, transferred or sold to another allied nation, or destroyed by DLA Disposition Services. The remainder enters the DTS to be retrograded back to home bases in the United States or military installations overseas.

This vast redeployment and retrograde task nests in a tangle of diplomatic, geographic, and fiscal constraints, each contributing to the complexity and requiring the careful attention of CDDOC and its several strategic partners. For example, in the diplomatic realm, some neighboring countries in the Middle East are sensitive to overt support to this U.S. operation. In some cases, governments find that American equipment publicly and visibly transiting their corridors is politically untenable. The DTS adopts mitigating measures. Similarly, some partner nations want to be careful not to provoke retaliation by the Taliban if they openly grant the United States access to their transportation nodes and corridors.

Simple geography presents significant constraints that compound the diplomatic factors. Afghanistan is, of course, a land-locked country with some major land routes traversing rugged terrain. Access to seaports starts with lengthy ground or air legs to position cargo for onward movement by sea. High altitudes in the north are susceptible to severe winter weather.

On the home front, the U.S. electorate generally supports the withdrawal from Afghanistan but demands efficiency in the face of extraordinary fiscal constraints. That is why General Paul Selva, commander of Air Mobility Command (AMC), announced at the September 2013 Air Force Association symposium that "we've documented now this past year \$400 million of essentially cost avoidance" from choosing sealift over airlift for transatlantic legs back to the United States.⁷ When airlift out of Afghanistan increased in mid-2013 after Afghanistan threatened to levy ground transit fees, the *New York Times* highlighted the impact on the overall retrograde price tag: "Air shipments are a far more expensive solution than simply paying the fines demanded by the Afghan government. If continued, the

air shipments could result in the withdrawal of forces reaching or exceeding \$7 billion, the upper end of [the DOD] estimated cost.”⁸ CDDOC is charged to execute the redeploy/retrograde mission within reasonable costs. There is generally no great urgency to the retrograde of equipment back to its home station, and airlift, a scarce and costly mode of transportation, must remain a carefully allocated resource even if capacity consistently exceeds requirements. That is a principle long codified in joint doctrine⁹ and one of the business rules that CDDOC has dealt with throughout its 10-year history. In 2003, in fact, inefficiencies in airlift allocation were one factor leading to establishment of the first DDOC.

What Lies Ahead

Although CDDOC has operated through the surges in Iraq and Afghanistan and the withdrawal from Iraq, the exact conditions and scope of the present Afghanistan withdrawal are unprecedented. A withdrawal is fundamentally different from a rotation; nothing can remain behind. The United States is well entrenched in several large operating bases after 12 years of battling the Taliban, and everything and everyone must be moved by one of several processes. Redeployment returns military members, DOD civilians, and their unit equipment to their home stations. Retrograde moves theater-procured equipment (equipment that was not unit deployed) to its final destination. A substantial remainder of U.S. equipment will be neither redeployed nor retrograded. Through the Foreign Military Sales or Foreign Excess Personal Property programs, the United States transfers ownership of its unneeded property to other nations.

Items not transferred, retrograded, or redeployed are destroyed by DLA Disposition Services. DLA's process ensures that items identified as excess are destroyed to ensure nothing of any tactical value to adversaries is left behind. Brigadier General Francisco Espallat, USA, CDDOC director from August 2013 to January 2014, called DLA

disposal capabilities “nothing short of amazing in terms of capacity, scale and scope. During the months of July, August and September of 2013, almost 140 million pounds of materiel was turned into scrap . . . a simply remarkable feat.” Where feasible, DLA sells the scrap locally, which generates revenue while putting potentially useful (but nonlethal) materials into Afghan hands.

The threat scenario also contributes to define the nature of the CDDOC task at hand since U.S. forces gradually become less militarily capable and therefore more vulnerable as the withdrawal progresses. This dynamic is by no means unique to *Enduring Freedom*; withdrawing forces faced this set of risks leaving Iraq as well. The power vacuum inevitably created by U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) withdrawal from Afghanistan means there is uncertainty about future allocations of political power. Will the Taliban exploit the exit, gain influence in Afghan politics, and exact retribution on Afghans who collaborated with U.S. and NATO forces? With December 31, 2014, clearly defined as the end of the operation and NATO operations, CDDOC's primary customer is faced with a dilemma: U.S. warfighters in Afghanistan may continue to face a viable, even resurgent, threat from the adversary while CDDOC and its partners on the U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) staff are asking them to turn in their tactical vehicles for redeployment. Warfighting commands must make complex decisions during this withdrawal about the sequence, rate, and timing of base closures; reduction in “boots on the ground”; and turn-in of tactical equipment. These same commanders must logically synchronize their equipment redeployment and retrograde with the corresponding personnel redeployments. These actions must, in turn, be adjusted to accommodate the changing operational environment.

Within this complex set of decisions lies a classic scenario in which those who lead logistics must be careful not to constrain operational forces and unwittingly create vulnerabilities. There is an inherent tension, accentuated during a

withdrawal, between the priorities of the warfighter and those of the logistician. The warfighter demands equipment and supplies in abundance to bolster fighting power against known threats and to hedge against unknown ones. The logistician, also executing USFOR-A orders like the warfighter, demands a steady, scheduled flow of personnel and equipment to be made available for transportation out of theater. This natural tension requires constant communication between the warfighter who wants to keep his soldiers and equipment, and the logistician who wants to transport them home.

The CDDOC staff is one major point of intersection for these competing interests. More specifically, much of this deconfliction and crucial communication happens in a compact set of offices in the New Kabul Complex in Afghanistan. There, liaison officers (LNOs) to USFOR-A from CDDOC and USTRANSCOM interface directly with the USFOR-A commander and staff—the warfighters. Successfully mapping out details of this massive withdrawal hinges on striking a proper balance between warfighter and logistician priorities, and the LNOs serve both parties as brokers, negotiators, and channels of direct “hot mic” communication. They communicate warfighter direction and priorities to CDDOC and its partners, and CDDOC adapts and shapes its processes in response.

Innovations

Within the last year, CDDOC has created processes—“re-tooled the plant”—to optimize the theater transportation system while remaining responsive to warfighter requirements and priorities. First, CDDOC has regularly deployed a small forward team of transportation experts into Afghanistan known as the Advisory Team for Expeditionary Air Mobility (A-Team). A-Team plans its engagements based on upcoming base closures and provides deployed warfighters with on-scene guidance and assistance in planning their outbound movements. Though fighting units at all echelons have capable embedded logisticians, these units are not necessarily prepared to

execute a comprehensive base closure required during a withdrawal. The A-Team contributes expertise for planning and executing the complete transition from a fully manned and equipped forward operating base (FOB) engaging the enemy to bare terrain revealing little evidence of past warfighter presence. A-Team members educate, initiate, and collaborate with remote warfighters to assist the theater's transportation system make that transition happen.

Second, CDDOC has adjusted its movement processes in response to a persistent and effective threat to U.S. and NATO personnel: improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Truck convoys manned by U.S. and NATO personnel have proved highly vulnerable to IED attacks, with adversary tactics constantly evolving. As the IED threat persisted and proved consistently lethal, the urgency to get soldiers off the road increased. CDDOC and its partners substantially adjusted the ratio of air and ground movements to lessen soldiers' exposure to the IED threat during convoy operations. Since planning for air movements requires greater precision (such as in load planning, pallet building, and identifying hazardous material), the A-Team's engagements at closing FOBs, while educating users on airlift processes, complemented the overall effort to increase air movement and get soldiers off the road. Lieutenant Colonel Breck Woodard, USAF, who has led CDDOC's new Retrograde Division since August 2013, quantified the results of those first engagements: "In the first 60 days of this initiative, the [US]CENTCOM DDOC enabled the closing of three major FOBs, increased airlift velocity 400 percent, supported the building and shipment of over 14,771 air pallets, put over 7,386 twenty-foot equivalent units of cargo in the air, and most importantly, eliminated 224 ground convoys which kept over 5,600 Soldiers out of harm's way on the most dangerous roads in the world."

A third CDDOC innovation, affecting a variable in the airlift velocity equation, is the One-Touch concept. When planning FOB closures, CDDOC looks for airlift-capable sites where intratheater airlift

can deliver FOB cargo directly to one of the theater's seaports instead of aggregating air cargo at an Afghanistan hub such as Bagram. Where aircraft performance factors permit, CDDOC plans C-130s or C-17s to fly full planeloads directly to a seaport where USTRANSCOM ships provide cost-effective onward movement to the United States. Overall velocity is increased, and handling decreased, when intermediate stops are eliminated. As redeployment tempo increases, One-Touch mitigates cargo bottlenecks at the major hubs by overflying those hubs and delivering directly to the multimodal ports.

A fourth initiative, Cascading FOBs, turns those airlift-capable FOBs into aggregation points. Smaller FOBs without fixed-wing airlift capability feed their cargo into a nearby airlift-capable FOB. Finally, CDDOC has assisted the J3 staff at USCENTCOM with developing expanded options for further accelerating movements in response to the warfighter's needs.

As the redeployment and retrograde operation began in the summer of 2013, then-Brigadier General Lee Levy, the CDDOC director from January to August 2013, commented that the experience of overseeing this massive redeployment and retrograde was like "getting a doctorate in strategic transportation."¹⁰ Earlier logistics leaders such as General Handy and General Kern had foreseen in 2003 the need for an independent team of transportation experts to guide USCENTCOM's movement processes. Their original Joint Intermodal Distribution Operations Center concept has matured into a network as DDOCs proliferated across all the geographic combatant commands (and one subunified command: United States Forces Korea). It has also evolved. CDDOC, out of operational necessity, has modified its manning, organization, and processes to fit the given conditions: periods of steady-state sustainment between surges and withdrawals. The DDOC is defined and codified in joint doctrine, having proved its worth as a forward-deployed USCENTCOM/J4 team formed from USTRANSCOM and DLA movement experts.

In the current season of retrograde and redeployment, CDDOC has modified movement processes to accommodate the warfighters of Operation *Enduring Freedom* and address the inherent and chronic tension between warfighter and logistician priorities. Lessons will be learned and processes will be refined as the remaining withdrawal concludes at the end of the year. But what does a post-2014 CDDOC look like? CDDOC will likely downsize significantly in 2015 and transition to smaller-scale, steady-state operations. Its structure, processes, and experts, though, will stand by in reserve for USCENTCOM's next contingency. JFQ

Notes

¹ General John P. Abizaid, USA, Commander, U.S. Central Command, official correspondence, December 12, 2003.

² Department of Defense, "U.S. Transportation Command Appointed as Defense Distribution Process Owner," press release 701-03, September 25, 2003.

³ Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Defense Logistics: Preliminary Observations on the Effectiveness of Logistics Activities during Operation Iraqi Freedom*, GAO-04-305R (Washington, DC: GAO, 2003).

⁴ Abizaid.

⁵ Glenn G. Joerger, Deputy Director of Operations, Headquarters U.S. Transportation Command, telephone interview by author, February 12, 2004.

⁶ General John W. Handy, USAF, Commander, U.S. Transportation Command, official correspondence, October 24, 2003.

⁷ Brendan McGarry, "Air Force Shortens Cargo Routes from Afghanistan," *Military.com*, September 24, 2013, available at <www.military.com/daily-news/2013/09/24/air-force-shortens-cargo-routes-from-afghanistan.html>.

⁸ Matthew Rosenberg, "Rifts Over Fees and Taliban Sour Afghanistan Exit," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2013, available at <www.nytimes.com/2013/07/19/world/asia/rifts-over-fees-and-taliban-sour-afghanistan-exit.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0>.

⁹ The new edition of Joint Publication 3-17, *Air Mobility Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, September 30, 2013), maintains this principle. See I-13-I-14.

¹⁰ Video interview with Brigadier General Lee Levy II, USAF, U.S. Central Command Deployment and Distribution Operations Center director, March 20, 2013, available at <www.dvidshub.net/video/285910/brig-gen-lee-levy-ii#.U9Ea5lbqxSZ>.